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World Chronicle

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POLITICAL AFFAIRS

Sir Kieran PRENDERGAST, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, reviews the political situation in the world from a United Nations perspective. He outlines the responsibilities of the Department of Political Affairs which include conflict resolution, peacemaking, peace-maintaining, as well as providing electoral assistance to Member States requesting such assistance. Sir Kieran believes that the United Nations is the world's largest conference and it is up to the Member States whether to keep it that way or not.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

As we approach the end of the century, wars and conflicts between and within nations continue to cause human suffering and threaten international peace and security. Meanwhile, other international economic, social and environmental problems persist and require global attention. Can collective solutions to these problems be found through the United Nations? And is the international community willing to deal with these issues?

Our guest today is in a unique position to reflect on the new role of the global organization. He is Sir Kieran Prendergast, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

Joining me to talk with Sir Kieran are James Bone of *The Times of London* and Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review*. Sir Kieran welcome to **World Chronicle.**

PRENDERGAST: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: For starters, for the benefit of our television audience which may not be familiar with the intricacies of the United Nations, tell us what your job entails?

PRENDERGAST: Well, the work of my Department concentrates on four main areas. The first is a conflict prevention, the second is peacemaking once the conflict has broken out, and the third is post-conflict peace-building once, that is to say, once the conflict is being resolved, try to make sure that the settlement sticks and the conflict does not recur. We also have a fourth task which is to help with electoral activities, particularly in these countries which have moved or are moving from a one-party state to a multi-party system.

LITTLEJOHNS: Monitoring elections.

PRENDERGAST: Monitoring elections, but also helping coordinate the observation of elections and also technical assistance for countries which want to introduce new institutions such as independent electoral commissions – that sort of thing – and look at the electoral laws to make sure they're fair.

LITTLEJOHNS: With respect to having been very successful in preventing conflicts?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I would say that there are three main problems when it comes to identifying – when it comes to conflict-prevention. The first is political will, and we are the United Nations Secretariat and there's a limit to what we can do in the absence of political will, especially when it involves the Security Council. It's really the Security Council that has to give us an effective mandate. The second problem is the issue of national sovereignty. You know, one of the big changes in the last thirty years is that, nowadays, most conflicts are within the states, rather than between states. We used to get

good old fashioned wars between Country A and Country B. Now, you get serious conflict breaking out between Ethnic Group A or an Ethnic Group B and if the government concerned wouldn't allow the United Nations or the international community to come in and try and help, maybe because it does not recognize that there is a problem and maybe because it thinks it's going to win, then there is very little that we can do. And, again, the third issue, I think, is resources. And I've seen some very important reports in the last month or two, one of them from the Carnegie Endowment, the other one commissioned by the United Nations Association of the United States, but they do involve or they do imply fairly serious increases in the amount of money that's going to be spent on this area. The fact that money is not forthcoming, there's very considerable limit on what can actually be done.

BONE: So, Sir Kieran, how would you, if you're a school teacher, grade yourself in all these four areas?

PRENDERGAST: Well, that's a tricky question, isn't it? Because ...

BONE: It's certainly not gonna be straight A's, sir.

PRENDERGAST: Not straight A's. Straight A's for intentions.

BONE: A for effort, anyway.

PRENDERGAST: A for effort, A for intention. But, I mean – the problems that I've mentioned are largely out of our control. So it's actually pretty difficult to give yourself a mark because, do you – do you criticize lack of achievement when you haven't got the tools and you haven't got the mandate?

BONE: There's an increasing problem for particularly your Department, Political Affairs, which has to deal with the Security Council. The Security Council is less and less willing to give tools. For instance, there's an increasing reluctance to use even peace-keeping – traditional peace-keeping operations – without use of force. There's even now resistance to imposing new sanctions. Do you feel, in your work, that you're hampered by the lack of tools?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I could always do with more and I'm sure that almost anybody watching this programme would say that in whatever field they're working, that they could always do with more. There are never going to be unlimited resources. I tend to see life in terms of a pendulum. And I think that after the end of the Cold War, there was a sort of pendulum swing in the United Nations, particularly in the Security Council, into thinking that the Council was going to be able to resolve all problems. That there's going to be a new world order and then there's a bit of a disillusion with that and the pendulum has maybe swung back too far the other way. I do think that .... I'm sorry?

MENON: Well, could you look at it another way? That the Security Council was successful in resolving conflicts that emerged from the Cold War, but was totally unsuccessful in dealing with anything else? That doesn't make sense.

PRENDERGAST: Well, that's another way of looking at it. But, whatever the reason, I think there's been a degree of disillusion, a degree of reticence and this has caused the pendulum to swing back too far the other way into a reluctance to do anything very serious.

MENON: Could I ask you – when you use the word political will, what are you talking about? What exactly does that mean? It's used very handily in the UN to describe all kinds of things.

PRENDERGAST: Right. Well, we can – most of us subscribe to the maxim that "an ounce of cure is worth a pound or kilo of prevention"; "a stitch in time saves nine". What political will means is, whether or not these sorts of maxims are gonna be translated into real effective action ....

MENON: No, when you ....

PRENDERGAST: Is the Council going to be willing actually to do anything or to authorize us to do something ...

MENON: No – but that's precisely what the question was. When you say political will, for instance, on Iraq, what exactly are you talking about? You have a countless Security Council resolutions which say this and this and this have to be done. It's not done. Why do governments come to the UN, adopt the resolution in the Security Council which asks that something be done, and then not exercise quote unquote political will, whatever that is?

PRENDERGAST: Well, we've switched a bit away from preventive action, haven't we? You switched from preventive action into enforcement action and, in the case of Iraq, I think the problem is slightly different. There, the problem is that there is no single agreed analysis and no single agreed prescription. Now, it seems to me that when the five members – the five Permanent Members of the Security Council – are agreed on analyzing a problem and what is the right solution to the problem, there is, at least, hope that effective action might be taken. When the Permanent Members of the Security Council are not agreed in terms of what needs to be done about something, they may agree on the analysis of what the problem is, but if they don't agree on what should be done about it, then there are quite clearly very strict limits on what sort of action the Council is going to be able to take. Now, my point about preventive action is a different one, which is, that even if there is an agreed analysis, there is simply a lack of resources, and sometimes a lack of imagination or insight which is needed in order to take that sort of action before a problem erupts. I mean, if we could move to a different phase of action by the United Nations, where they really act on the belief that prevention is better than cure, then, I think you would see a serious

improvement in the situation in the world, and particularly in many of those countries where there's either conflict already or where conflict is likely to break out.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States is well-known for procrastinating and they put it off and put if off until finally it comes to the crunch. How do you deal with that, I mean, this is endemic to international diplomacy, it seems.

PRENDERGAST: Well, that's why I used maybe slightly pretentious words like imagination or wisdom or insight. I think one of the problems is that foreign policy in many countries is largely ruled by the finance ministry of the country. And finance ministries find it much more easy and governments, generally, find it much more easy to deal with the problem when it actually exists, when it has erupted. And moreover, if you are successful in preventive action, how do you prove it?

MENON: But, are you saying then that their interest – basic financial commercial interest – of governments are not convergent but they cannot think of any -- of political action, united political action – only in the period of crisis can you see ...

PRENDERGAST: I'm not – I'm not making such an ambitious statement. What I'm saying is, the finance ministries tend to say "no, why should you do it?" and when you have had the eruption of the crisis, they're willing to spend a billion dollars where they're not willing to spend ten million dollars ...

BONE: Sometimes they're not willing to spend a billion dollars as in Rwanda or somewhere like that.

PRENDERGAST: But they have to, I mean they've spent – they may not have spent a billion dollars in Rwanda on peace-keeping, but they spent very large sums of money in Rwanda on looking after refugees, on humanitarian relief, and so on. So you end up spending it one way or another. Look at Somalia, I mean, you know, huge sums of money were spent in Somalia both on the peace-keeping budget but also in terms of famine relief. Enormous sums of money. And so, I mean, these things that you like illustrate the maxim that if you can manage to take the effective preventive action before the problem gets off the ground, you can save a lot of money. But again, how do you prove it? Because if a conflict hasn't – let's say you saw ten potential serious problems in the next three years, what have you got to do and show to your treasuries for money that was spent? Nothing..

MENON: But – but how ...

BONE: This is a though you prevented more wars I have never heard of ...

MENON: No, but the question is, how relevant is the mechanism of the UN. The system of meetings and conferences and so on, are essentially from the last century – of the early part of this century. How relevant are they to a world that's really globalizing in many important ways – in the flow of information and commercial relations. We're not talking of

the same world as when the UN was conceptualized. The mechanism that was conceptualized, how relevant is it now?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I think you can take action very rapidly and effectively if you have got the world to do so. And the main argument for the UN in this sort of field is, who else is accepted as impartial? Who else can be a mediator, particularly in this intra-country conflict. The neighbours are very often suspect to one side or the other. The great powers may be suspect or may have a history of involvement. So, who else can be trusted to act impartially and I think ....

MENON: But I was not questioning the integrity of the UN. I was questioning the mechanism of it. The relevance of the mechanism of it. It's a very slow process – building consensus through conferences and meetings and resolutions. For instance, the General Assembly adopts approximately 200 resolutions a year. How relevant is any one resolution to what the actual reality of the world it deals with?

PRENDERGAST: Well, again, if we're still talking about conflict prevention, I mean, how many ....

MENON: No, no. We were actually talking about the UN.

PRENDERGAST: Well, all right, so we're switching attack altogether to the question of whether the UN is relevant or not. Well, the UN is the world's largest standing conference, isn't it?

MENON: Uh-huh.

PRENDERGAST: It's what the Member States say they want. And if the Member States say they want it, that's fine by me. You may or may not believe it, but as a Secretary, the official dealing with these areas of conflict-prevention, peacemaking, peace conflict, peace building, a lot of what takes place in these things, does not touch me so directly. So I don't feel like I've got a comparative advantage in commenting on whether they – will they work or not. And indeed, whether I think they work and whether I think they didn't work is not the end all of this. Since it's up to the Member States to decide for themselves how best to order their affairs. What I would say to you is that, when we do have the political will, it is possible to take action very rapidly. Now I think of the action that was authorized in relation to Albania last year, which was essentially done every weekend.

BONE: It's a Friday weekend, as well.

PRENDERGAST: That's right.

BONE: By the Italians who are busy – who are absolutely..

PRENDERGAST: That's a variant of Murphy's Law which is: something will always happen on the eve or on a public holiday, or on a weekend ...

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle,** our guest is Sir Kieran Prendergast, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

BONE: So, how should United Nations be different after the Cold War to the way it was before while the Cold War is still under way?

PRENDERGAST: You mean from the point of view of the Member States or the Security Council or the Secretariat?

BONE: Well, from the Secretariat. I mean, from the kind of approach it has to the problems that exist.

PRENDERGAST: Well, I think from our point of view, the changes happened is that there is no longer this complicating factor of one side say, backing – one major power backing one side of the conflict and other pack backing another side of the conflict just for the hell of it. Just to prevent something happening even if they don't have any particular interest in it themselves ...

BONE: And often you have it – nobody controlling anybody in the conflict. Don't you ....

PRENDERGAST: Yes, it's been, indeed, a de-complicating factor and I came across this first when I was still working for the British Foreign Office over Angola where any action to solve the Angolan problem have been stymied for years and years and years by this complicating factor. And suddenly, we find the Americans and the Russians working together because Russia finally didn't have any vital interest and it had no particular interest in just keeping a long-running dispute going. So you moved from competition to cooperation. And I think it seem that's really quite a lot. It was, maybe to a surprising degree. It's one of the major changes I find after returning to the United Nations after an absence of fifteen years.

MENON: I'm glad you raised Angola because that brings us to the topic of Africa, where the UN is really predominantly focused on African conflicts at the moment. But how successful has the UN been in dealing with them because Africa is not high on the list of priorities of any of the major powers? So how do you deal with Africa in a situation like that?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I think the UN is on rather well in Africa – I mean, you mentioned Angola which is the one – which is – only had partial settlement. Where it has a long-running semi-settlement. But, I mean, look at Mozambique, which has been extremely successful and brought to an end a war that has been going on for fifteen years – great custody and the unfortunate people of Mozambique. Look at Namibia where, again, there has been a dispute going for many years and which was solved very successfully and whereas there is ....

MENON: But this has ....

PRENDERGAST: You have to let me finish my question, do you? And where there is now very successful effort at national reconciliation. The UN has done very well in South Africa. The United Nations' help with election observation and help with the transition to post-Apartheid society and – we have a very good record in Africa.

MENON: All the ones you've mentioned are essentially Cold War situations which were resolved after the end of the Cold War. But you take a look at all the other things from Somalia to Sudan to Central Africa, Rwanda, Burundi – we have genocide there and the UN essentially walked out of it – a situation where genocide was about to take place and everyone knew it.

PRENDERGAST: I think these are the international community walked away from it for – I mean, you have to be very careful when you talk about the UN. Which bit of the UN do you mean? UNHCR, for example, have been there for about fifty years nonstop ...

LITTLEJOHNS: High Commissioner for Refugees ..

PRENDERGAST: The High Commissioner for Refugees has been there for about fifty years nonstop. And when we were having very great difficulties in what was then Zaire last year, the humanitarian agencies were there the whole time. I think one of the issues of the Security Council is to answer the question why is it too difficult to deploy peace-keepers who are professional military soldiers wearing blue helmets and with body armour and weapons, when it's okay for the humanitarian agencies, for UNHCR, for UNICEF to be ... and NGOs, to be there in those sort of situations and you've got also to recognize that problems like Rwanda and Burundi are horrendously difficult to solve. You got a long cycle of violence, you got deeply ingrained ethnic conflict, you got severe competition for – it's very heavily over-populated areas – you got severe competition for land and for water. There is no magic wand. If you want, we'll talk about the theory of conflict prevention and the theory of conflict resolution, and the theory of rightness. Many of these problems are not ripe for a solution. You don't have a mutually hurting stalemate. You don't have an internal dynamic by the parties to be willing to reconcile and to share a power and what can anyone do, let alone the United Nations, in conditions like that?

LITTLEJOHNS: And that, Sir Prendergast, is a terrible situation in Algeria that's been going on for a very long time. Massacres of the innocent, terrible reports coming out of that country. Is there anything the UN can do? I think the Secretary-General may have offered some kind of good offices, but what's the response been?

PRENDERGAST: He's done it more than once and the response is not, so far, being particularly palliative. It illustrates the point I made earlier in this programme about sovereignty. That if you are able to take action, it does require the consent of the country

concerned. I think the Secretary-General was probably the first person at his level to speak out last year and to say that this was a problem that needed some international assistance. But the response of the Algerian Government was: no, thank you very much, we can do over this by ourselves. Mrs. Robinson, the High Commissioner of the Human Rights, has suggested that she ought to send the rapporteurs from the Human Rights Commission dealing with torture and dealing with involuntary disappearances and summary executions to go and talk to the government in Algeria and the other organizations in Algeria and see what we can do to help. I think there has to be a realization that the international community wishes to help Algeria. It does not want to go there, you know, and flay anybody. But it does want to help and it does appear that there's a need for some sort of external assistance. But, so long as the government does not want that, it's not going to happen.

BONE: So the culture of the sovereignty see that as something that should be further eroded. I mean, I think it would be helpful for the UN if the culture of the sovereignty were eroded more.

PRENDERGAST: Well, James, you advised me to jump in to very deep water because this is a subject to very and vivid and other ways very cordial debate among the Member States. But there is a tension between, on one hand, the need to take effective action to maintain international peace and security, and on the other, the sovereign rights of Member States. And the debate is between – about the balance between the two.

BONE: But the balance has definitely shifted towards the erosion of sovereignty with people claiming the right for humanitarian intervention and, in cases of genocide or cases of exodus as in Northern Iraq, for instance, after the Gulf War, and the very fact that there are this human rights rapporteur strolling the world going to try to visit Algeria itself, challenge the sovereignty. So, do you think we can expect more of the same in the next ten to twenty-five years – something like that?

PRENDERGAST: I think the pressures will continue, but the pressures run in different directions and there's a large body of opinion in the United Nations that attaches very great importance to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. And also, if the sovereignty is extremely resistant to any infringement of that and there's a very substantial body of opinion including important members of the Security Council who are not talking on the United Nations' human rights role being elevated ...

MENON: Well, of course, you have to put, you know ...

BONE: No ...

MENON: What about James is saying first, of course, is from an extremely European point of view because from the point of view of the Third World, our sovereignty has never been very firm. I mean, we come from a period of Colonialism where our sovereignty didn't

exist. So it's quite wrong to say that sovereignty needs to be eroded. I mean, from the perspective of most of the third World, our sovereignty has to be protected. So, I think it's a completely different analysis. Having said that, I think we might look at it from a different angle. Is it – it's part of the problem, perhaps, that we have a world in which countries are at many different stages of political evolution. On the one hand, you have Britain with about 800 years of steady political evolution towards democratic rule and self-control and on the other hand, you have a country like Burundi or Rwanda where control of their own destiny is at a very primitive level. Is this part of the problem?

PRENDERGAST: It's part of the problem. Another part of the problem is that there's a large constituency in the third World – things that the West is obsessed with, political rights – and it's not at all concerned about other rights such as the right to work, and, you know, the right to food, the right to a secure environment and that the – I dare say that the West wishes to impose its model of civil and political rights on the Third World and that is most definitely part of it. It's not helped, I think, by a perception in the Third World, also, that sanctions are a weapon used by the West in order to impose its views on Third World countries, on a fairly limited range of Third World countries at that. But, nevertheless, I mean, I think it is also a caricature to argue that human rights concerns are held only in the West as the Secretary-General has pointed out. You know, do Africans not care about abuses of their own fellow citizens and, of course, they do. If you look at the human rights rapporteurs, some of the most distinguished of them are from Africa. For example, the rapporteur on involuntary disappearance is an arbitrary executioner – a Senegalese. You may remember – he came to the United States a couple of months ago to do an investigation into complaints in that respect about the United States system and ...

MENON: How is democracy doing in Africa? A few years ago, we were all told about the resurgence of democracy around the world, and so on. But since then, there seems to be a steady decline?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I think it's doing pretty well. In Africa, if you look in terms of trends, I mean, there are more and more countries which have had a restoration of democracy. The Africa – the OAU – I think has just agreed that ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Organization of African Unity.

PRENDERGAST: ... has just agreed that it's not going to recognize regimes which came to power through coup and, for example, they have rejected the coup in Sierra Leone and pressure is being brought for a restoration of democratic rule. And they're right they came to the Security Council for cover and support and ...

MENON: But does this mean that they don't recognize the Democratic Republic of the Congo because they're obviously the military rule ....

MENON: But does this mean that they don't recognize the Democratic Republic of the Congo because they're obviously the military rule ....

BONE: You don't remember President Kabila's famous line, Papa, when he said, "I didn't have a coup, I had a revolution".

MENON: How do you distinguish between the two?

PRENDERGAST: I think there was a pretty universal recognition that the Democratic Republic of Congo was a special case. But, I think, you're going to find that even there, there is going to continue to be encouragement and pressure, if necessary, from the international community and from the OAU on the authorities in Kinshasa to hold elections in due time. But there is also recognition that the Zaire was a failed state and that time is necessary in order to rebuild institutions and get there a basic minimum of conditions in which elections could be held.

MENON: So how about ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Time out. Time is up. Sir Kieran, that's all the time we have. We could have gone on for a long time. Thank you for being with us in this edition of **World Chronicle.**